

## PRAIRIE CORDGRASS

*Spartina pectinata* Bosc ex  
 Link  
 plant symbol = SPPE

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Rose Lake Plant  
 Materials Center



Robert H. Mohlenbrock  
 USDA NRCS 1989  
 Midwestern Wetland Flora  
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### Uses

**Erosion Control:** Prairie cordgrass has a stiff stem and vigorous rhizomes that enable it to provide good shoreline cover, and contribute to wave energy dissipation. It has proven useful in preventing erosion on earthfill dams, spillways and drainage channels.

**Restoration:** This species could be used to restore or reconstruct wetlands where prolonged flooding does not occur.

**Wildlife:** Prairie cordgrass forms thick stands around marshes, providing good cover for game birds, song birds and small mammals.

**Ethnobotanic:** Native Americans and pioneers used prairie cordgrass for thatching lodges.

This grass is not a forage resource.

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

### Description

Prairie cordgrass is a tall (6-8 feet), robust, native grass. Strong rhizomes with the ability to grow 5-10 feet per year separate this grass from the other desirable native warm season grasses. An easy characteristic to look for is the sharp, serrated edges of the leaf blade. Seedheads are composed of 10 to 20 spikes attached to the main stem. Each spike has up to 40 spikelets, all growing in two rows on the side of the spike away from the stem. The seed typically matures within a week or two of frost, and is flat, paper-like with barbed awns that attach firmly to fur or fabric. There are 197,000 seeds per pound.

### Adaptation and Distribution

Prairie cordgrass grows throughout the Northeast, Great Lakes and Midwest states as well as most other states in the country. It is typically found on lower, poorly drained soils along roadsides, ditches, streams, marshes and potholes. It also occurs in floodplains, wet meadows and back dune areas. Prairie cordgrass grows well on seasonally dry sites, tolerates alkaline conditions and high water tables but is intolerant of prolonged flooding. Seedlings are not shade tolerant. The rapid seedling development of this species enables it to avoid frost-heaving problems on wetter soils.

For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

### Establishment

Prairie cordgrass should be seeded as early in the spring as possible. It should be planted with other warm season grasses to add variety to the cover. Native grass drills such as the Truax, Great Plains, or Tye are the best units for planting this seed as they have positive feed mechanisms for chaffy seed and double disk furrow openers. If a suitable drill is not available or cannot be used due to terrain, then broadcasting the seed and tracking it in with a bulldozer is also an excellent planting method. Mulches are avoided with warm season grass plantings unless absolutely necessary to control erosion--then use 1500 pounds per acre of straw as a maximum rate.

No nitrogen fertilizer should be applied during the seeding year. Phosphorus and potassium should be at medium levels, and the pH should be 6.0 or better.

### **Management**

Prairie cordgrass has few management needs except to avoid mowing. Cutting this grass more than once per season will reduce its vigor.

### **Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

There are currently no cultivars of prairie cordgrass in commercial production. Releases are pending from the NRCS Plant Materials Centers at Big Flats, New York and Manhattan, Kansas.

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS <<http://plants.usda.gov>> and Plant Materials Program Web sites <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>.

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